



VOICE FOR LIFE IN THE SCHOOL

The RSCM's Voice for Life programme has been well-received since its release in 1999 and revision in 2004. But Voice for Life isn't just for churches – the programme was carefully devised to be relevant to any choir, whether in church, school or community. The RSCM's Education Team answers some common questions about using Voice for Life in the school.

WHY USE VOICE FOR LIFE IN A SCHOOL?

Singing has a fundamental place in music education: in England, it's the first requirement – number 1a – in each of the National Curriculum programmes of study for music. Outside the classroom, singing activities can have a tremendous impact on students and the ethos of the school.

The Voice for Life scheme helps singers to work to the best of their ability, through good vocal technique, musical knowledge and understanding of the music they sing. In a school context, this helps:

1. The singers. Good technique avoids potentially damaging vocal faults, a challenging and stimulating programme creates enthusiasm, and successful performances build self-esteem.
2. The teacher. When your students understand the music they're singing, it takes the slog out of learning new music – and the more the singers are motivated, the easier it is to work with them and recruit new members.
3. The school. Any successful, happy group will have a positive effect on ethos and atmosphere, and the 'shop front' element of good quality performance shouldn't be neglected.

WHAT MUSIC DO WE HAVE TO SING?

There's no prescribed repertoire within the Voice for Life programme. It is designed to integrate with everything the school does, whether sacred or secular music, and as part of any curriculum or singing programme. For example, Voice for Life works well alongside repertoire from the Sing Up Songbank used by many schools. The

material integrates with almost every part of the National Curriculum for Music in England: performing skills, appraising, listening, and applying knowledge and understanding.

ISN'T THERE LOTS OF MATERIAL ABOUT THE CHURCH?

When it comes to using Voice for Life in school or community choirs, many people panic about module E – 'choir in context'. For church choirs the primary context is obviously the church: its services, seasons and festivals, its community and ministry, its places of worship. But only four 'extra sessions' at the end of module E deal explicitly with these; the core of this module deals with wider questions of music and community.

DO WE NEED TO WEAR THE COLOURED RIBBONS?

While coloured ribbons and medals are suitable for choirs that sing in services, many school choirs prefer instead to award a badge for achievement, which can be worn on a uniform. Coloured badges are available at every level and RSCM-affiliated schools can purchase these at a discount from RSCM Music Direct.

WHAT IF THERE IS NO SPECIALIST MUSICIAN AVAILABLE?

The *Voice for Life Choir Trainer's Book* contains everything that is needed to introduce Voice for Life to a group and work through the modules. While some basic musical knowledge is needed, the materials in the book will give inexperienced leaders more confidence. For those entirely new to choir leading, the White Level (free to download on the RSCM website) is an ideal starting point and 'taster' of the scheme.

HOW DO WE FIND THE TIME?

School choirs often face significant pressure on practice time: a rehearsal crammed into the lunch break



Students of Royal Russell School on a music tour in Norway



'KEEN TO WORK TOWARDS THE NEXT LEVEL'

Ormesby Village Junior School has two choirs. The main choir of pupils from the Junior School has about 60 members. The Chamber Choir, affiliated to the RSCM, includes students from the local High School in addition to our own pupils.

The thirty choristers are justly proud of their achievements and always keen to work towards the next level. Each week, at the beginning of rehearsal time, the choir is grouped according to the various levels and tutored for about 30 minutes in musical and religious knowledge. The singers then all meet together for the main rehearsal, preparing for concerts and services within the school and in the local community.

We keep in contact with local clergy who, when possible, come into school to give religious instruction. Awards are presented in one of our local churches by clergy during a service or a concert given by the choir.

Anne Brooks, Director of Music, Ormesby Village Junior School, Norfolk

THE GROUNDING FOR ALL OUR MUSIC-MAKING

Nearly 75% of all the pupils at Royal Russell are involved in making music on a regular basis. Over half the pupils learn one or more instruments. The Choristers is a choir of 70 boys and girls who rehearse three times every week. The Barbershop, a close harmony choir for 15 teenage boys, provides the tenor and bass for the Choristers as needed. These boys attend two separate rehearsals each week. The Chamber Choir of 16 is drawn from the members of these choirs.

Voice for Life gives the Choristers the grounding they need to make all their music making enjoyable and rewarding. Classroom lessons are now practically based – we nurture the gifts of our pupils but they still need a good grounding in theory to help them give of their best. The Voice for Life series takes every pupil through a course of carefully constructed exercises but it is fun and the pupils have a real sense of achievement when they complete and pass each level.

Hugh Sutton, Director of Music and Precentor, Royal Russell School, Croydon

DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE

At Trinity College School, choir recruitment is the (relatively) easy part – getting kids to sing well in public something altogether different. I have found that Voice for Life offers a structure that is gradual, but which also produces tremendous confidence in any young singer. The Voice for Life pins, worn daily by singers on their blazers, are keenly anticipated.

Hugh Verrier joined the choir at 14, without any choral experience. As with many young, changing voices, he had difficulty matching pitch. After some months he was holding his part fairly well, but it was only with his work on the Bronze Level material that he discovered the power and flexibility in his voice. He became an enthusiastic singer – encouraging his peers in our Chapel Choir and moving towards a very professional standard as Bass Lead. Although Hugh has moved on to university in the USA, one lasting result of his confident solo singing at TCS is the number of students who are now willing to take on solo work because of his example.

Randy Mills, Director of Music, Trinity College School, Port Hope, Canada

THE PASTORAL SIDE OF THE SCHEME IS EXCELLENT

We use the Voice for Life scheme at Ockbrook School to encourage young singers to develop their singing skills to the highest level possible. The attainment charts and workbook guides are superb in letting the girls know where they are and what they have to do to gain one of the Voice for Life badges. The pastoral side of the scheme is excellent as our girls participate in choral evensong at Derby Cathedral on a regular basis and in special services at school. In the past we have had girls joining the Cathedral Choir to further their sacred music studies and many of our girls now sing in their local church choirs. We now have three girls in National Youth Choir (the only school in the East or West Midlands to be able to claim that) and their success is partly due to the Voice for Life scheme.

Greg Maskalick, Director of Music, Ockbrook School, Derbyshire

sometimes doesn't seem to allow anything more than learning the notes! Do not overlook the importance of having well-trained singers; not only does it impact on their well-being and the overall sound of the choir, but it is also a terrific time-saver. The time put in on module B will be repaid many times over when your choristers can sight-read the music you put in front of them!

HOW IS THIS RELEVANT TO CHURCHES?

Voice for Life can help build links between churches and schools. Not only is it helpful for singers to follow a similar scheme (school choir members can easily transfer to a church choir, for example) but it can enable joint activities such as assemblies or a school performance in church. If you already use Voice for Life with a church choir, could you share your skills with a local school?

AND FINALLY . . .

Voice for Life isn't just an awards scheme: its principles underpin the RSCM's training choirs, courses and Young Voices Festivals, opening up rewarding musical and spiritual opportunities for singers.

VOICE
for **LIFE**

WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

For further information about Voice for Life and to download the free White Level and Gold Dust resources visit www.rscm.com/vfl

Some local areas also run introductory workshops: look out for details in *The Network* or visit www.rscm.com